

Bulgaria's fragile coalition government, which had faced regular protests and calls for its resignation since it took power after early elections in 2013, was further weakened by poor performance in European Parliament elections in May 2014 and finally collapsed following a series of crises that emerged in June.

Early in the month, Bulgaria was forced to cease work on the South Stream pipeline, which was intended to deliver natural gas from Russia to Eastern and Central Europe, after the European Commission found that the project was in violation of European Union (EU) energy regulations. Separately, the EU suspended funds for regional development programs in Bulgaria over concerns about fraud and mismanagement. These EU interventions led the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) party to split with the lead faction in the ruling coalition, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), and call for early elections.

Also in June, the central bank seized Corporate Commercial Bank (KTB), the country's fourth-largest lender, after a sudden run in which customers removed over a fifth of its deposits. The bank was known for funding the progovernment media empire of DPS politician Delyan Peevski, and the large customer withdrawals were reportedly triggered when Peevski withdrew his money. An audit of KTB found accounting gaps and unsecured loans to entities linked to the bank's owner, Tsvetan Vassilev, who was charged in August with embezzlement. Prime Minister Plamen Oresharski resigned in July, and elections took place in early October. In November, the center-right opposition party Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) formed a minority government with the liberal Reformist Bloc, with support from two additional parties. The new government is Bulgaria's fifth in two years, counting two caretaker administrations.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 33 / 40 (+2) [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 11 / 12 (+1)

The unicameral National Assembly, composed of 240 members, is elected every four years in 31 multimember constituencies. The president, elected for up to two five-year terms, is the head of state but has limited powers. The legislature chooses the prime minister, who serves as head of government. In the 2011 presidential election, Rosen Plevneliev of GERB defeated Ivailo Kalfin of the BSP in a runoff with 53 percent of the vote.

In the October 2014 parliamentary elections, GERB led with 84 seats, followed by the BSP with 39, the DPS with 38, the Reformist Bloc with 23, and the nationalist Patriotic Front with 19. A new populist party, Bulgaria without Censorship (BBT), took 15 seats, while the Alternative for Bulgarian Revival (ABV), a Socialist splinter group led by former president Georgi Parvanov, secured 11 seats. The ultranationalist Ataka party also won 11 seats. The ABV and most Patriotic Front lawmakers endorsed the new GERB-led government—which was headed by returning prime minister Boyko Borisov.

According to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the 2014 elections were open and competitive, and fundamental rights were respected. In a departure from the 2013 elections, there were no prominent allegations of large-scale fraud that cast doubt on the overall validity of the voting. Nevertheless, monitors noted that certain electoral regulations, including campaign finance rules, were poorly enforced. Observers have blamed the unusually low voter turnout of approximately 48 percent on

voter fatigue and lackluster campaigns. As in previous elections, accusations of vote buying and other irregularities undermined public confidence in the process. A new electoral code, adopted in March and amended in April, introduced the option for voters to choose specific candidates rather than party lists, but low awareness effectively left party leaders in control of who won seats on each list.

In the May 2014 elections for the European Parliament, GERB won six seats, followed by the BSP and DPS with four seats each. BBT in alliance with a small nationalist party took two seats, and the Reformist Bloc took one. Ataka failed to win a seat.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 14 / 16

A record eight factions won seats in the 2014 elections, passing a 4 percent vote threshold required for representation. The center-left BSP lost more than half of its seats, as did Ataka, which had allied itself with the unpopular government. GERB, which was founded in 2006 and governed from 2009 to 2013, is one in a series of center-right parties to rise and fall in Bulgaria's multiparty system.

The law dictates that electoral campaigns must be conducted in the Bulgarian language. While the ethnic Turkish minority is represented by the DPS, the Romany minority is more marginalized. Small Romany parties are active, and many Roma reportedly vote for the DPS. Two Romany candidates won seats in the 2014 elections, while none had won in 2013. Ataka and smaller nationalist parties regularly use hate speech in their campaigns, targeting ethnic Turks, Roma, Jews, Muslims, and Syrian refugees, among other groups.

C. Functioning of Government: 8 / 12 (+1)

Corruption is a serious concern in Bulgaria. Both the EU interventions and the KTB collapse in 2014 were seen as consequences of illicit collusion among the political and economic elite. Peevski's New Bulgarian Media Group (NBMG) consistently supports the party in power, and its rapid expansion was backed by KTB. In turn, the bank received a great deal of business from state-owned enterprises, creating a triangular relationship. A rift between Peevski and Vassilev allegedly triggered the run on KTB deposits in June. In November, the central bank revoked KTB's license, clearing the way for bankruptcy proceedings and the repayment of some \$2.3 billion in insured deposits.

EU concerns about South Stream included suspicions that contracts were awarded to businesses linked to the BSP and DPS, at inflated costs and without transparent competition. The EU's unrelated suspension of funding for regional development and tourism programs in June added to an existing suspension of EU assistance for environmental programs. All stemmed from Bulgaria's repeated contracting and accounting irregularities.

Bulgaria was ranked 69 out of 175 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index. The resignation of the Oresharski government after a year of public pressure was seen as a victory for accountability, and the postelection coalition talks were praised for transparency.

Civil Liberties: 46 / 60 (-1)

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 14 / 16

Bulgarian media have become more vulnerable to political and economic pressures as some foreign media firms withdraw from the struggling market and domestic ownership becomes more concentrated. News outlets often tailor coverage to suit the interests of their owners. Although the state-owned media generally provide balanced coverage, ineffective legislation leaves them exposed to political influence. The government does not restrict internet access.

Religious freedom is generally upheld, but Muslims and members of other minority faiths have reported instances of harassment and discrimination, and some local authorities have blocked proselytizing or the construction of minority religious buildings. A series of raids in November 2014 led to the arrest of an imam and six others suspected of aiding the Islamic State militant group. The government does not restrict academic freedom.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 11 / 12

The authorities generally respect freedoms of assembly and association. Although police occasionally used excessive force during the large and frequent antigovernment protests in 2013, the demonstrations were generally peaceful. Protests occurring in 2014 proceeded largely without incident.

Nongovernmental organizations operate freely. Workers have the right to join trade unions, but public employees cannot strike or bargain collectively, and private employers often discriminate against union members without facing serious repercussions.

F. Rule of Law: 10 / 16 (–1)

Bulgaria's judiciary has benefited from legal and institutional reforms associated with EU accession, but practical gains in efficiency and accountability have been lacking. The EU has noted ongoing flaws in the judicial appointment and disciplinary processes.

Organized crime is a serious problem, and scores of suspected contract killings over the past decade remain unsolved. Former interior minister Tsvetan Tsvetanov went on trial in 2014 for presiding over unchecked surveillance. In May, he was acquitted of separate embezzlement charges and sentenced to four years in prison for obstruction of justice in the investigation of a police commander. Tsvetanov claimed the charges against him were political and pledged to appeal his conviction. Incidents of mistreatment by police have been reported, and conditions in many prisons remain inadequate.

Ethnic minorities, particularly Roma, face discrimination in employment, health care, education, and housing. Discrimination based on sexual orientation is illegal, but societal bias against LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people reportedly persists.

More than 11,000 asylum seekers were registered in Bulgaria during 2013, a significant increase from the previous annual average of approximately 1,000. Syrian refugees accounted for the majority of the surge, which overwhelmed government preparations and drew hostility from ultranationalist groups. Conditions in reception centers reportedly improved in 2014, but Human Rights Watch (HRW) linked this to a harsh new policy of blocking refugees at the border with Turkey, which led to a drop-off in entries. As the government continued the construction of a 160-kilometer border fence, HRW documented dozens of cases in which

groups of Syrians, Afghans, and others were allegedly detained, beaten, and forced back across the Turkish border, in violation of domestic and international law.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 11 / 16

Bulgarians face no significant restrictions on their freedom of movement, whether for internal or external travel, and are generally able to change residence or employment without interference.

Bulgaria's shadow economy accounts for approximately one-third of the country's gross domestic product; widespread corruption has been suggested as a key factor behind the phenomenon. Organized crime is believed to play an influential role in private business activity.

Women remain underrepresented in political life, accounting for just a fifth of National Assembly seats after the 2014 elections. Domestic violence is an ongoing concern. The country is a source of human-trafficking victims, of whom Roma make up a disproportionately large share.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

[Full Methodology](#)